Second Largest Fairbury Greenhouse

By: Dale C. Maley
For: Fairbury Blade newspaper
Date: February 15, 2022

Around 1910, Fairbury had four different greenhouses selling flowers and plants. The largest was the Kring Greenhouse, located on 7th Street west of the Prairie Central High School. The Sheaf Greenhouse was on the west side of Fairbury. Two half-brothers each operated separate greenhouses. John Milne & Son Greenhouse was located about three blocks west of the Kring Greenhouse. The Alexander Milne Greenhouse was located on North First Street. Eventually, Alexander Milne bought out both the John Milne & Son Greenhouse and the Sheaf Greenhouse. He dismantled the two greenhouses and used the glass to expand his operation on north First Street. The Milne and Kring greenhouses were the only two florists in Fairbury for many years.

The story of the Milne family began with Alexander George Milne (1800-1859) in Aberdeen, Scotland. He married Eliza Isabella Torrie (1805-1842) in Aberdeen. Alexander and Eliza Milne had two girls and one boy. Son John Milne was born in 1840 in Aberdeen. His mother, Eliza Torrie, died when John was just two years old. John's father, Alexander George Milne, married for the second time to Marjory May Dow. A. G. Milne and Marjory had four girls and one boy. Their son, Alexander George Milne Jr., was born in 1856 in Aberdeen. Alexander George Milne Jr. was 16 years younger than his half-brother John Milne.

Thirty-two-year-old John Milne married 26-year-old Sarah Jane Stubbings in 1872 in London, England. After their marriage, John and Sarah Milne emigrated from London to Chicago. John Milne had learned the florist trade when he grew up in Scotland and continued as a florist in Chicago.

The first child of John and Sarah Milne was born in 1873 in Chicago and was named George Alexander Milne. Also, in 1873, John's half-brother, Alexander George Milne Jr., emigrated from Scotland to Chicago when he was 17 years of age. A. G. Milne Jr. had also learned the florist trade while living in Scotland. A. G. Milne Jr. entered the florist trade in Chicago and marketed garden products for ten years.

While living in Chicago, John and Sarah Milne had a baby girl they named Hilda Milne. Unfortunately, Hilda died when she was just six years old. This left son George Alexander Milne as their only child.

In 1884, at the age of 28, A. G. Milne Jr. married Elsie Rae McKenzie in Chicago. She was 24 years old and was born in Aberdeen, Scotland. While A. G. and Elsie Milne were living in Chicago, they had four children. Agnes and May Gordon Milne were both born in 1886 in Chicago. Alexander G. Milne was born in 1888 and Elsie Milne was born in 1890. The nickname of son A. G. Milne born in 1888, was Jerry Milne. He likely had this nickname to avoid confusion because his father and grandfather had the same name.

In 1889, John Milne moved his family from Chicago to Fairbury. He purchased the Remington house on East Hickory Street. John and Sarah lived in the same house until they died. John Milne, along with his 16-year-old son Alexander George Milne, established the florist business of John Milne & Sons in Fairbury.

One year after his half-brother, John Milne, moved from Chicago to Fairbury, Alexander George Milne Jr. and his family moved to Fairbury. A. G. Milne Jr. bought land and a small greenhouse from David Smith on north First Street. Fairbury's four florist businesses now included Sheaf Greenhouse, Kring Bros., John Milne & Son, and the Alex Milne Greenhouse.

The 1892 to 1894 period was a tragic one for the A. G. Milne Jr. family. Son John Milne was born in 1892 in Fairbury. Unfortunately, in 1892, six-year-old daughter Agnes Milne and two-year-old daughter Elsie Milne passed away. In 1893, ten-month-old son John Milne died. In 1894, son Roy Milne also died at ten months of age. The A. G. Milne Jr. family lost four children in two years. In 1898, the last child of A. G. and Elsie Milne named Thomas Walter Milne was born.

In 1893, the Blade reported that John Milne & Son was building a new greenhouse on lots north of Fairbury. In the 1898 business directory, Fairbury had three florist and gardener businesses. These three were Alex Milne, John Milne & Son, and Kring Bros.

In 1900, the Blade reported that 27-year-old George Milne had an accident at the John Milne & Son facility. Their greenhouse had a windmill to provide water for the plants. The brake on the windmill stuck, and George climbed the 60-foot high tower to repair it. George had an accident, and Dr. Otis had to amputate one of his fingers that got stuck in the mechanism.

John Milne continued to operate his greenhouse with his son George Milne until he retired in 1914 when he was 74 years old. John sold his greenhouse to his half-brother, A. G. Milne. John Milne's wife, Sarah Milne, died in 1917 at the age of 71. John Milne died in 1929 at the age of 89.

The Alex Milne greenhouse continued its operations. They expanded their greenhouses using the glass from the John Milne & Son greenhouse and the J. S. Sheaf Greenhouse they bought out in 1921.

In 1918, Jerry Milne served in World War I. He was released from the military in 1919 and married Rosemond "Tillie" Nussbaum. They had four children, including Joan Louise Milne, Margaret Jean Milne, and Jack Gordon Milne.

In 1920, Thomas Milne married Edna G. Hair. They had no children. In 1937, A. G. Milne died in Fairbury at the age of 81. His wife, Elsie Milne, died in 1950 at the age of 90. Sons Jerry Milne and Thomas Milne continued to operate the greenhouse until Jerry retired in 1964. Jerry Milne died in 1966 at the age of 77.

In 1966, Keith and Sarah Stiver bought 1.5 acres from Thomas Milne and the estate of Jerry Milne to build their new ranch-style funeral home on North First Street. After the Milne greenhouse had been sitting unused for three years, Louis and Katie Kaisner purchased it in 1969. They operated the business until it was closed in 1980. In 1985, Thomas Milne died at the age of 86. The Milne family provided florist services for over seven decades to many Fairbury citizens.

Circa 1894 Family Photo of Alexander George Milne, Jerry Milne, Elsie Ray Milne, Mae Milne